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TESTIMONY SUPPORTING SB 5512
Before the Transportation and Economic Development Subcommittee
Of the Joint Ways & Means Committee
March 25th, 2019
Submitted by: Sybil Hebb

Co-Chair Manning, Co-Chair Gomberg, and members of the Sub-committee:

On behalf of the Oregon Law Center (OLC), I submit this written testimony in support of additional investments in Senate Bill 5512, which is the budget for the Oregon Housing and Community Services Department (OHCS) for the 2019-21 biennium. I thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.

The Oregon Law Center is a statewide non-profit entity whose mission is to provide access to justice for low-income Oregonians through the provision of the highest quality civil legal services. Helping families maintain safe, stable housing is a critical part of our work. Without stable housing, it is difficult or impossible to hold down a job, keep children in school, access neighborhood amenities, and stay healthy. As rental vacancy rates have plummeted and housing has become less and less affordable across the state, our clients have increasingly struggled to maintain stability for themselves and their children. An increasing number of our clients are homeless, and homeownership is ever-more out of reach of most Oregonians.

We know that this is not just an urban problem - rural Oregonians are particularly impacted.¹ More than 21,000 students experienced homelessness last year, with some of the highest rates coming from rural districts. Affordable housing is disproportionately difficult to find and maintain for communities of color, single women with children, seniors, and people with disabilities. While the risks and burdens of this crisis rest most heavily on the shoulders of low-income families, it is not only they who are at risk. We hear stories of middle income, working Oregonians living in their cars, seeking services from shelters, or desperately afraid of homelessness. This housing insecurity has untold negative consequences for the health, education, safety, and stability of all of our communities.

It is with these concerns in mind that we submit this testimony in urgent support of the investments in services proposed in SB 5512. There is no single or simple response that can successfully resolve our state's current housing crisis. We must have solutions designed to address the entire spectrum of housing needs, from homelessness prevention and response all the way through private market development, rental resources, and homeownership support. In particular, we wish to stress the importance of investment in the following programs as of critical importance to our clients:

¹ <https://oregoneconomicanalysis.com/2018/03/07/update-on-rural-housing-affordability/>

\$50 Million Investment in Ongoing Funding for the State Homeless Assistance Program (SHAP) and the Emergency Housing Account (EHA): Oregon has the nation’s second highest rate of unsheltered homelessness, and the highest rate of youth homelessness. In both urban and rural areas, too many of our neighbors and their children are sleeping in cars, in tents, in parks, on sidewalks, in doorways, and anywhere else they can possibly find shelter from the elements.² Across Oregon, there is an effective statewide system to distribute assistance designed to prevent homelessness and to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness. The EHA and SHAP funds are distributed to community action agencies who are well-positioned to ensure that the dollars are focused on the most pressing local needs. These resources save lives. At a time when Oregon is experiencing some of the most severe need in the nation, we must sufficiently invest in these effective resources that are designed to have an immediate impact.

\$14 Million Investment to Target the Needs of Families with Children: This proposal will provide stable and affordable housing and wrap- around services to address Oregon’s most vulnerable families with children. This investment will be combined with approximately \$6.5 million in Housing Stabilization funding in the Department of Human Services budget, to ensure that families with children can exit homelessness and achieve stability. Rental assistance will be available for up to two years in order to give families a period of stability within which to focus on resolving any underlying issues impacting their housing instability such as lack of financial security, lack of educational attainment, and medical and other environmental challenges. This program proposes an innovative collaboration between agencies designed to ensure that families experiencing homelessness have a chance at stability, preventing generational trauma for Oregon’s children in need.

\$20 Million to Support Renters in Private Market Rental Housing to access information, legal assistance, hotline service, and specialized assistance to navigate housing challenges for priority populations: This package of proposals is designed to address the realities of the current rental housing market, in which vacancy rates are extremely low, competition is high, and rents are unaffordable to most Oregonians. Our low-income clients who are tenants struggle mightily to access fair housing protections and to defend themselves in the event of violations. Tenants struggle to access housing and to maintain housing stability. Particularly vulnerable populations are the most at risk. Our clients who are lucky enough to have housing choice vouchers often struggle to find a way to use their vouchers, and our clients who are survivors of domestic or sexual violence struggle to find safe housing that works within the context of a larger safety plan. The OHCS budget proposals designed to meet these needs will ensure access to information for tenants seeking to know and understand their rights and responsibilities, as well as access to legal assistance for those whose rights have been violated. The navigation proposals will ensure that specific priority populations will have access to on-site expert assistance so that vulnerable renters can access the housing stability they need.

- **Of particular importance to OLC’s clients is the Domestic and Sexual Violence Housing Navigator proposal, which would allocate \$5 million in funding to ensure that community-based domestic and sexual violence shelter programs would have on-site housing navigators who can help survivors address their permanent housing needs.** Often, survivors seeking safety identify stable and affordable housing as their highest priority. Without access to stable housing, survivors fleeing abuse are left with no choice but to sleep on the streets. The most recent Domestic Violence Census conducted by the National Network to End Domestic Violence indicated that the highest unmet need of survivors seeking assistance from shelters was housing. Locating specialized housing navigators at the network of Domestic and Sexual Violence programs will ensure that survivors have a better chance at stability and safety. OLC endorses the Alliance to End Violence Against Women testimony submitted to this effect.

² <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2018-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>; <https://pamplinmedia.com/pt/9-news/403002-299906-oregon-ranks-first-for-homeless-youth>

\$200 million to develop new affordable homes across Oregon: (80% to affordable rental homes, 20% to affordable homes for sale): Severe rent burdens affect Oregon's lowest income families, and homeownership is increasingly out of reach of even moderate income Oregonians. While private market development has picked up in recent years, new units coming on line are unaffordable to most Oregonians. In addition, our statewide rates of new construction are still well below our population growth rates. This means market and affordability pressures continue to worsen. State subsidy is necessary to ensure the creation of affordable homes for low and moderate income Oregonians.

\$100 million to preserve existing affordable rental housing: A significant portion of Oregon's current affordable housing stock was funded and built with loans that require affordability terms. When these loan terms expire, we risk losing the affordable units to private market rates. Expiration of affordability means displacement of entire low-income communities. Preservation funds can be used to rehabilitate and preserve the affordability of these units, thus saving entire communities from displacement. This strategy is an efficient and effective use of state funds, since it is far cheaper to preserve currently affordable housing than it is to build new housing.

\$1.24 million to help people access foreclosure counseling. Foreclosure continues to impact low and moderate income Oregonians, especially seniors and others on fixed incomes. Across Oregon, organizations provide counseling to homeowners facing foreclosure to help them successfully navigate the Oregon Foreclosure Avoidance program, and find an agreement with their lender. OLC prioritized passage of the foreclosure avoidance program in prior sessions, and we have found it to be effective at keeping our clients who are homeowners in their homes, or help them recognize when it is time to transition out of their loan. The foreclosure process is incredibly confusing, and with the help of a counselor, homeowners have a chance to understand their options and make the choices that are right for them.

In closing, OLC urges support of investments in the above programs at this time of extreme crisis in our state. We additionally support the Department's request for increased staffing in order to ensure successful implementation of these programs. Staffing capacity at the Department can provide technical assistance and facilitation with grantee programs seeking to meet needs in their communities.

We appreciate this committee's dedication and attention to ensuring that all Oregonians have a safe, stable, and affordable place to call home. Thank you for your time and for your service to this state. free to contact me should you have questions.

Sincerely,

Sybil Hebb
Oregon Law Center